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# Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Summary

**Part II, Chapter II**

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## Summary

After the initial sense of his victory wears off, the Underground Man becomes nauseated and repentant, just as he described in "Underground." To escape these unpleasant feelings, he retreats into intense, rapturous dreams in which he becomes a noble hero. All his mockery dissolves in "faith, hope, and love," and he imagines that wonderful opportunities for activity will present themselves to him.

Sometimes, flashes of the "beautiful and lofty" come upon the Underground Man in the middle of his debauches, and he says that the contrast between these flashes of loftiness and the degradation of his debauches creates a delicious suffering. In his dreams he feels love, though he feels no need to apply the love to his real life. His dreams always end with artistic moments stolen from poetry and novels. He describes the scenes of his dreams: they combine elements from the life of Napoleon and from Lord Byron's *Manfred*, a poem about a proud and gloomy hero. The Underground Man imagines that his audience considers vulgar, and he is ashamed of himself for needing to justify his own dreams.

After three months of dreaming, the ecstasy of his dreams makes the Underground Man want to embrace mankind. He feels the need to "rush into society." His only social outlet is the chief of his department, Anton Antonych Setochkin. On Tuesdays, the Underground Man can drink tea at Setochkin's house with Setochkin's two daughters and one or two other guests. At tea, the Underground Man invariably becomes paralyzed, incapable of participating in conversation.

When he goes home, though, he feels he has been cured of his need for social interaction for a while.

One Thursday, the Underground Man becomes too lonely to wait until the following Tuesday and decides to visit a former classmate, Simonov. Although the Underground Man considered his time at school "penal servitude" and has cut off relations with most of his classmates, he believes that Simonov is less narrow-minded and more honest than the others, and therefore maintains a relationship with him. The Underground Man suspects that he disgusts Simonov, but he is not sure.

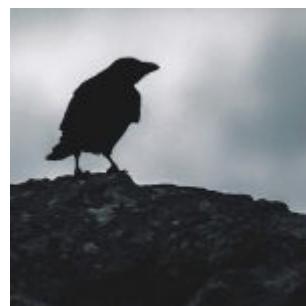
## Analysis

The subject matter of the Underground Man's dreams is further evidence that he has fully absorbed the European literary and cultural models that Dostoevsky believed were artificially imposed upon Russia. The figures with which the Underground Man identifies his "heroic" self come from French and English history and literature: many of the details and imagery of his great dreams come from the life of Napoleon, while others are related to the fictional Manfred from Lord Byron's poem. These dreams show us that the Underground Man is capable of genuine emotion and pleasure: he describes the dreams as "sweet" and refuses to dismiss them. However, his expression of these pleasant feelings is misdirected. Rather than share his feelings with others, the Underground Man expresses them in imaginary situations, using the imagery of an alien culture—that of western Europe. His fantasies, then, have no place in the world in which he lives. The Underground Man's dreams function as an allegory for the irrelevancy of Western culture imposed on Russian lives. The dreams also indicate that the Underground Man's real life

has been so devoid of satisfying human interaction that he can only find models for happiness and triumph in literature.

The Underground Man does, of course, have urges to interact socially with other human beings. These urges come after several months of "dreaming." After immersing himself in a world modeled on literature rather than real life, he feels that he is capable of interacting with people. Comfortable in the realm of the literary and in the landscape of his own imagination, the Underground Man is able to convince himself that he is capable of participating in the real social world. Moreover, his sizable ego drives him to want to share his wonderful thoughts and feelings with the rest of the world. This urge to socialize also reveals that the twenty-four-year-old Underground Man is not yet entirely entrenched in the underground—he wants to interact with the outside world.

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